



**PLANNING COMMISSION  
STAFF REPORT  
April 15, 2025**

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**Prepared by:** Lucy Rollins, Senior Planner

**DATA SUMMARY**

**Application Number:** 25PLN-07  
**Subject:** Sign Exception Permit for wall signs exceeding height standards on a Priority 2 structure  
**Location/APN:** 122 East Main St / APN 008-343-004  
**Applicant:** Amanda Ashley, on behalf of owner  
**Zoning/General Plan:** Town Core (TC) – Historic Combining District (H) / Commercial (C)  
**Entitlement:** Sign Exception Permit  
**Environmental Status:** Categorical Exemption

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

1. That the Planning Commission approve the “Texas Tommy’s” and address signs as presented, or as modified at the public meeting, which includes the following actions:
  - a. Determine the project Categorically Exempt pursuant to Section 15301, Class 1, of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Guidelines, as detailed in the staff report;
  - b. Adopt Findings of Fact for approval of the Sign Exception Permit as presented in the Staff Report; and,
  - c. Approve the Sign Exception Permit for the “Texas Tommy’s” and address signs in accordance with the Conditions of Approval, attached to the Staff Report.

**BACKGROUND:**

The existing 2-story exposed brick structure was built circa 1860 according to the City of Grass Valley Historical Inventory. The 1872 Nevada County Directory lists the owner of the property as John Willard Relley, carpenter, with the lot valued at \$500 and the brick house and frame building valued at \$1,500. Relley's property was subsequently split and by 1891 it was occupied by a meat market and the Golden Gate Hotel with the infamous "Texas Tommy's Brothel" located upstairs. Ellis Rose, aka Texas Tommy, was the madam of the brothel while it operated, according to the Nevada County Historical Society. By 1898 the building was occupied by the hotel and a saloon. In the early 1900s the building was occupied by the Grass Valley Rochdale Co. and from the 1930s through the 1950s J.Y. Cheung was proprietor of the Young China Cafe. More recently, the building was the location of Frank's Pizza beginning in the 1960s, and currently Bicycle Thief, which opened in 2024.

In 2023, after Frank's Pizza had closed, the current owner applied for building permits to renovate the structure. Under permit 23BLD-0313, the owner remodeled the upstairs, which had previously been home to the Texas Tommy's brothel and later a hotel, to three residential dwelling units. Under permit 22B3BLD-0228, the current exterior balcony fronting East Main Street was installed. The downstairs was subsequently remodeled to accommodate the new pizza restaurant.

Today, the structure is considered a Priority 2 structure in the Grass Valley Historical Inventory, meaning it is a significant building in contributing to the historic district and 1872 historic inventory, and has retained historic integrity.

The Grass Valley Historical Commission reviewed the project at their regular meeting on March 11, 2025. Commissioners were enthusiastic about the "Texas Tommy" sign to highlight the history of the building and recommended approval of the proposed height of the signs. However, the Commission requested two modifications to the signs to be more consistent with historic design:

1. Text on both signs should be more rectilinear. According to Commissioners [MARK] and Poston, historic signs typically had text that was more linear, rather than at a slant. They requested this change be made to the "Texas Tommy" text on the front sign and "East Main Street" on the rear sign.
2. The "Texas Tommy" text stay within the gold decorative border, if used, rather than projecting over the border.

The applicant has developed modified designs for DRC's consideration in response to the feedback from the Historical Commission.

At their regular meeting on March 25, 2025, the DRC reviewed the project as originally proposed and as modified in response to recommendations from the Historical Commission. The applicant provided revised signs for both the front and rear. For the front sign, the revised design included rectilinear text for "Texas Tommy's" and the text inside the gold decorative border. For the rear sign, the text "East Main Street" was revised to be rectilinear. The DRC recommended that the Planning Commission approve the front sign (Texas Tommy's) as revised, with rectilinear text inside the border per the recommendation of the Historical Commission. The DRC added that increasing the spacing between letters for the text to take up more space in the sign area would be acceptable. For the rear address sign, the DRC recommended that the Planning Commission approve the original design for the sign, as preferred by the applicant. The Committee's justification for this recommendation was that this sign is not visible from the front side of the building facing, an address sign is not necessarily historic, and that the angled lettering was more consistent with the decorative elements of the address sign.

### **PROJECT PROPOSAL:**

The applicant has proposed two signs that require a Sign Exception permit:

1. "Texas Tommy's" Sign:  
This proposed sign is 69 inches long by 25 inches tall, for a total of 11.96 square feet and features white lettering with a gold leave border on a black background. The

lettering is printed at an angle to appear to project beyond the gold leaf accent outline. The proposed sign would be located 13 inches below the top of the parapet on the front of the building, and 31 feet from the sidewalk below, in the existing rectangular frieze. The applicant proposes to install the sign to provide a finished look within the frieze and pay homage to the history of the building. The applicant has also included three alternative sign designs in Attachment 5, in order of preference, for consideration.

Staff searched Nevada County Historical Society and Grass Valley Historical Inventory records and could not identify a previous sign in this place; however, the historical inventory does not state that the frieze is a historical element. Staff expects that this space was used for signage or a decorative feature prior to digital records. Attachment 5 includes photos from the applicant on similar signage locations on other buildings.

2. Rear Address Sign:

The address sign proposed on the rear of the building at the access point for Unit 4 on the upstairs level is 16 inches wide by 65.5 inches tall, for a total of 7.2 square feet. The sign is proposed to be located 58 inches below the roof top and the top of the sign to be 17 feet above the finished grade below. The sign features white lettering and gold leaf decorative borders on a black background. The intent of the sign is to clearly mark the entrance to Unit 4 for tenants and their visitors.

Regulatory Authority: The proposed sign is considered a "Wall Sign," the standards for which are outlined in Section 17.72.030 (L) GVMC, and include the following provision:

1. One wall sign may be located on a primary structure frontage, and on one secondary structure frontage.
2. The area of a wall sign shall not exceed one square foot for each linear foot of primary tenant frontage and one-half additional square foot for each linear foot of secondary tenant frontage or ten percent of the area of the building facade on which the sign is mounted or painted, including the area of windows, doors, and recesses, whichever is less. The total area of all signs on a primary frontage shall not exceed one hundred square feet and the total area of all signs on a secondary frontage shall not exceed fifty square feet.
3. A wall sign shall not project more than twelve inches from the surface to which it is attached.

While the proposed signs are in compliance with the standards specific to wall signs, they exceed the allowed height for signs, as established by Section 17.38.060(C)(2):

**Maximum Height for Signs on Structures.** The top of a sign mounted on a structure shall not extend higher than the lesser of:

- a. The top of the wall to which the sign is attached, in the case of a one-story structure;
- b. The window sills of the second floor, in the case of a multi-story structure; or
- c. Twenty feet above normal grade.

Further, Section 17.28.040(C)(2)(b)(v) establishes that "no signs shall be located above the awning, unless previously existing." In cases where there is not evidence of a previously

existing sign, above-awning signs in the Historical combining zone are subject to historic review.

Pursuant to Table 3-9 GVMC, a sign exception permit may be granted by the planning commission, with a recommendation by the Development Review Committee, when a sign “exceeds standards specified in the sign ordinance.” In this case, both signs exceed the permitted height for signs on multi-story structures. Therefore, a Development Review Committee recommendation, followed by Planning Commission is the appropriate review process. In this case, as the structure is a Priority 2 structure in the Historic District, Historical Commission review is required prior to proceeding to the Development Review Committee.

Section 6.3.5 of the City Grass Valley Design Review Guidelines for the 1872 Historic Townsite notes that, historically, signs were mounted on exterior walls using cleats or metal brackets. Some signs were affixed into the wall of the building itself in inset friezes identifying its owner or perhaps affiliation with a fraternal lodge.

### **GENERAL PLAN AND ZONING:**

**General Plan:** The Grass Valley 2020 General Plan identifies the site as Commercial (C). The intent of the Commercial General Plan designation includes all types of commercial retail and service establishments on the highway and along major streets.

**Zoning:** The Town Core (TC) zoning designation is intended to strengthen the mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented nature of the existing downtown. The TC zone permits a full range of retail, restaurant, and housing uses. The Historical combining zone (-H) is intended to identify important cultural resource sites and structures in the city, to ensure that any proposal to alter the state of the site or structure is carefully considered prior to implementation.

### **SITE DESCRIPTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING:**

The site is built out with a 3,912 square foot, 2-story masonry exposed brick structure with a restaurant on the ground floor and residential units on the second floor.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION:**

The proposed project qualifies for a Categorical Exemption pursuant to Section 15301, Class 1, of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Guidelines. A Class 1 Categorical Exemption consists of the operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alternation of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of use beyond that existing at the time of the lead agency’s determination. The proposed signs are intended to mark the history of the structure and aid in tenant access. Therefore, the signs will not result in an expansion of the use of the property.

### **FINDINGS:**

1. The City received a complete application for Sign Exception Application 25PLN-07.

2. The Historical Commission reviewed Sign Exception Application 25PLN-07 at their regular meeting on March 11, 2025.
3. The Grass Valley Development Review Committee reviewed Sign Exception Application 25PLN-07 at their meeting on March 25, 2025.
4. The Grass Valley Planning Commission reviewed Sign Exception Application 25PLN-07 at their meeting on \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The Grass Valley Planning Commission reviewed the project in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act and concluded that the project qualifies for a Class 1, Categorical Exemption in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act and CEQA Guidelines.
6. This project is consistent with City's General Plan.
7. The project is consistent with the applicable sections and development standards in the Development Code.
8. The project, as conditioned, complies with the City of Grass Valley Community Design Guidelines, including that "signage should be designed as an integral architectural element of the project and site to which it relates".
9. The proposed use is allowed within the applicable zone and complies with all other applicable provisions of this Development Code and the Municipal Code.
10. The design, location, size, and operating characteristics of the proposed activity are compatible with the existing and future land uses in the vicinity.
11. The site is physically suitable in terms of design, location, shape, size, and operating characteristics. It ensures that the density, intensity, and type of use being proposed would not endanger, jeopardize, or otherwise constitute a hazard to the public convenience, health, interest, safety, or welfare, or be materially injurious to the improvements, persons, property, or uses in the vicinity and zone in which the property is located.

**A. RECOMMENDED CONDITIONS:**

1. The approval date for Planning Commission review of the proposed sign is \_\_\_\_\_, with an effective date of Thursday, \_\_\_\_\_, pursuant to Section 17.74.020 GVMC. This project is approved for a period of one year and shall expire on \_\_\_\_\_, unless the project has been effectuated or the applicant requests a time extension that is approved by the Development Review Committee pursuant to the Development Code.
2. The final design shall be consistent with the Development Review application and plans provided by the applicant and approved by the Planning Commission (25PLN-07). The project is approved subject to plans on file with the Community Development Department. The Community Development Director may approve minor changes as determined appropriate.

3. Prior to any work occurring, building permits shall be obtained from the Community Development Department, Building Division.
4. The signs shall be maintained in good repair and functioning properly at all times.
5. The applicant agrees to defend, indemnify, and hold harmless the City of Grass Valley in any action or proceeding brought against the City of Grass Valley to void or annul this discretionary land use approval.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Aerial Map
2. Vicinity Map
3. Universal Application
4. Sign Exception Permit Application
5. Sign Plan Set
  - a. Revised Designs
  - b. Original Designs
6. Texas Tommy photo
7. Grass Valley Historical Inventory record